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SUBJECT: NGOS SEE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AS SOLUTION TO CONFLICT IN CHHATTISGARH

REF: 2009 MUMBAI 12

MUMBAI 00000017 001.2 OF 003

¶11. (U) Summary: The tribal area of the southern part of the state of Chhattisgarh, known as the Bastar region, is one of the most heavily affected by the Maoist insurgency. Decades of official neglect of social development in this region, as well as its remoteness, has made it easy for Maoist groups to establish a base. State and central government officials agree that development efforts must complement anti-insurgency efforts, now ongoing, in order to reduce the appeal of the Maoists. However, NGOs argue that development should focus on tribal needs, rather than economic growth-led development, and fear that the prospect of armed conflict would exact a heavy toll on the tribal population (septel). NGOs are working to fill the void in basic services, helping schools perform better, introducing improved health and hygiene practices and empowering village councils to speak up for the communities' needs. Observers note that slowly signs are emerging of increased faith in government institutions. If government operations to rout the Maoists lead to more armed conflict, however, the NGOs providing essential services in the area may flee for safety, compounding the toll on the tribal population. End Summary.

¶12. (U) Chhattisgarh's remote southern region, known as Bastar, comprised of the Kanker, Bastar and Dantewada districts, has suffered from decades of official neglect. Once a far-flung district of the state of Madhya Pradesh, it is now part of the new state of Chhattisgarh. Sparsely populated, covered in thick forests and hills, the largely tribal population in this area has existed on subsistence agriculture and forest products. For state officials and police, the Bastar region was always seen as a "punishment posting." For instance, in a recent visit to Chhattisgarh, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) health officials in Raipur told Congenoffs that over two thirds of the positions for Chhattisgarh state health officials in the region were unfilled, or whose incumbents had refused to take up the post. The development indicators for this region are some of India's lowest. According to United Nations Development Program (UNDP) measurements, the literacy rates for Bastar and Dantewada districts are 43.9 and 30.2 percent, respectively; at 104 deaths for 1000 live births, Bastar has one of the country's highest infant mortality rates. According to UNDP's 2001 data, Bastar and Dantewada districts' per capita income was 170 USD, and 203

USD, respectively.

¶13. (U) NGOs allege that state development plans focus on building infrastructure that serves the needs of mining and power companies that want to exploit Chhattisgarh's mineral-rich southern regions at the expense of investing in education, health and good governance. Sushanta Kumar Bhuyan, Deputy General Manager of Naandi Foundation, an NGO focusing on girl-child education in Chhattisgarh and other states noted, "a road is of no use to people who don't even wear shoes." At a recent forum on the Maoist problem in Mumbai, Himanshu Kumar, director of Vanvasi Chetena Ashram (VCA), an NGO implementing various foreign-funded projects for social development in Bastar - one of which is with UNICEF for primary education in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps -- decried the long-standing neglect of tribal people, and argued that these people are often left with few options. (Note: Kumar is a vocal critic of Chhattisgarh's anti-Maoist efforts, and claims that the state ordered part of his facility destroyed in May 2009. End Note.) Ejaz Kaiser, Hindustan Times Bureau Chief in Raipur, who has traveled into Bastar region and met with villagers, explains that the tribal peoples' needs are simple: "They want to preserve their rights to agricultural land, their right to harvest forest products, grazing rights for cattle, and health and education for their children." However, he lamented, the government is not listening to what the tribals want. Instead, they have prioritized a development agenda which focuses on roads and basic infrastructure which serve industrial and commercial interests and facilitates collusion between politicians, officials, contractors, and business interests, he argued.

MUMBAI 00000017 002.2 OF 003

NGOs Provide Educational Assistance in Most-Neglected Areas

¶14. (U) Though the Chhattisgarh government has largely neglected human development in the remote tribal areas, NGOs are active in many of the Maoist-affected areas to provide basic human development services such as education, health care and good governance. One NGO, Naandi Foundation, works to promote education in Chhattisgarh's remote villages, especially for girls. Focusing on children in Kanker District, the northern part of the Bastar region, Naandi tutors 9000 students in government schools and helps teachers improve their instructional capacity. Most of the students are first generation learners with no educational support from home, according to Bhuyan, so Naandi must also win the confidence of the parents, convincing them of the value of education for their children. Bhuyan reports that Maoists have threatened Naandi's tutors, but none have been harmed or prevented from working with the students.

¶15. (U) Education efforts in the Bastar region have been challenged by the occasional use of schools as police barracks in remote areas, which has invited Maoist attacks. State officials acknowledge that security forces have occupied up to 12 schools, but claim that over 400 schools have been attacked by Maoists over the past decade. Other interlocutors complained that even where Maoists have not destroyed schools, they block the schools from operating, threatening the teachers and insisting on indoctrinating the youth themselves. Kaiser reports that the state authorized the spending of USD 7.2 million this fiscal year for the construction of police barracks in Bastar and is moving forces out of schools in the region in response to the intervention by the National Human Rights

Commission (NHRC). (Note: Shaheen Nilofer, Chief of the Raipur field office of UNICEF said her office continues to raise this issue with the UN. End note.)

¶ 16. (U) Despite these challenges, Nilofer reports that educational levels in Chhattisgarh are improving in primary education, with girls attending school at about the same rate as boys. She added that girl-participation drops radically in secondary school, however. The discrepancy is caused by societal views of the value of educating girls, family fears for the safety of girls when they must travel further for school, and girls' concerns about sharing toilet facilities with boys, she said. UNICEF's research found that in tribal areas, school attendance of adolescent girls rose appreciably when separate bathrooms were provided for girls.

Healthcare Severely Strained in Bastar

¶ 17. (U) Nilofer explained that since the Bastar region has a high tribal population, (more than 70 percent tribal compared to a state-wide proportion of 32.5 percent) and suffers from one of the country's highest infant mortality rates, the area qualifies for specific central government funds for "backward" areas. However, Nilofer said getting medical officers willing to serve in strife-torn areas is difficult. She reported that UNICEF programs have made modest progress in improving village health conditions by introducing hygiene training and educating girls to serve as health outreach workers to encourage those needing advanced medical help to go to clinics where they could be properly diagnosed and treated.

NGOs also Focus on Grass Roots Governance

MUMBAI 00000017 003.2 OF 003

¶ 18. (U) UNICEF also works in four of the 18 internally displaced-persons (IDP) camps in the Bastar region, serving approximately 8,000 families. (Note: IDP camps were created in 2005-06 when tribals fled Maoist violence, or were moved by the state, allegedly for their own protection. End Note.) Working with village councils, known as panchayats, UNICEF workers help assess the community needs and teach leaders to advocate for public funding. While most government funding is distributed through state institutions, Nilofer noted that some funding is specifically earmarked for projects identified by the panchayats. In addition, UNICEF focuses on "convergence planning," the coordination of government services and programs, bringing together various departments within state and local government. For example, where a community needs safe drinking water, UNICEF brings together health officials, project engineers, and those who control funding under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Program (NREG) to design and implement a solution using local labor and helping to funnel wages into the community. (Note: Nilofer pointed out that although Chhattisgarh is the third-best performing state in terms of allocating NREG funds with the least "leakage," participation in the employment scheme is low due to high illiteracy and malnutrition. End Note.) Overall, UNICEF and other NGOs are optimistic that their efforts are leading to greater, village-level participatory democracy, which could help reduce the attraction of the Maoists. Nilofer noted that citizens are increasingly demanding that local decisions be made

by the full village council in a public forum, instead of behind closed doors.

¶9. (SBU) Comment: With anti-Maoist operations underway, the state government may not be able to deliver needed development programs in remote, tribal areas in the near term due to massive deficits of personnel, capacity, and political will, let alone the security concerns. As is often the case in many remote areas of India, NGOs are taking the lead in implementing innovative development programs - sometimes in partnership with local government -- in southern Chhattisgarh. If the government's anti-insurgency operations result in major armed conflict in the region, NGOs, who provide the bulk of social services in the region, may be forced to flee for safety, creating a greater vacuum and compounding the difficulties for the tribals living in the conflict zone. If past is precedent, the state will likely move forward with major projects that will contribute to the development of Chhattisgarh's rich mineral deposits, considered essential for India's growth. While the state will ultimately seek to introduce some development in the region, tribals on lands sought by developers or the state could be pressured or paid off to move. End Comment.

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